At Sea

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by blythechild

Summary

Will Graham survives the fall from the cliff, dragging a dying Hannibal Lecter with him from the sea. Hiding out in an abandoned shack, Will must decide his next move: return to the FBI and his life, or embrace who he's become.

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Will trudged back into the abandoned lifeguard station as quietly as he could. The door lock was busted from the day before when he'd kicked it in, body shaking and carrying too much dead weight to care about the consequences. But now the only thing keeping the Atlantic wind from blowing it open was a huge piece of driftwood that Will braced it with from the inside. Not the securest of refuges. He put down his bag and shuffled the wood back into place, his cheek on fire under its bandage, his back a topographical diagram of deep tissue bruising, and his fingers aching from the chill. The fire in the stove had gone out in the night and he hadn't had the time or finger dexterity to rebuild it at dawn, too bent on his mission for supplies. Good thing there was a hot plate for cooking…

He retrieved his bag and limped to the section of the windswept hovel that might laughably be called "a kitchen". His stomach lurched dangerously at the thought of food, but he knew he had to try; his stressed-out, injured, sleep-deprived body needed care. And his mind needed the fuel so he could decide what to do next.

"What time is it?"

Will shrugged without looking back. "No idea. It's overcast and grey, so it's hard to tell. But it's been light out for a while now."

There was a groan that might have been acceptance.

"Sorry if I woke you," Will continued, setting the egg carton and rasher of bacon on the counter while he hunted for a skillet. They'd have to cook all it now. There was no fridge in the lifeguard station.

"I was awake. After a fashion."

Hannibal sounded frayed, voice deeper and more accented than Will was used to. *It must be the pain*, he thought, and caught himself, wondering if Hannibal ever actually felt pain the way everyone else did. Will turned and caught his outline in the gloom. Hannibal was attempting to prop himself up on a fold-out pallet and thin emergency blanket. But his pallor was grey and shiny, dark circles under dull eyes and a hand pressed over the bandages binding his abdomen. He still had flecks of dried blood on his face, and the sea water had dried his hair into unseemly spikes. He looked old and compromised; hardly the man who had single-handedly destroyed so many lives.

"You look terrible," Will stated flatly. Everything he'd done or said since he pulled Hannibal from the ocean was *flat.*

"Thank you," Hannibal responded by rote, but the left corner of his mouth twitched slightly. Perhaps he was delirious again. "What are you making?"

Will turned back to the hot plate. "Eggs and bacon. It was all could lift from the local gas station without being noticed."

"There's a gas station nearby?"

“Not nearby, no.”

Will flicked on the hot plate and its light blinked cheerily at him. At least the place still had electricity. Heat would’ve been nice, but you can’t have it all. He waited for the skillet to warm up and then laid out some bacon into it. The hot plate radiated back to him against the damp of the station house, and when the bacon fat softened and crackled in the skillet, Will’s stomach growled in protest. He also felt every millimeter of every bruise, slice and tear in him, like the November wind had made them all deeper and now the heat announced their displeasure. The sizzling mesmerized him a little, just enough for his mind to admit its exhaustion, and for his anxious present to scream wildly in his head: WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

“Do we have chives?” Hannibal’s rasp roused him. Will twitched violently, perhaps having dozed a little over the small patch of warmth, and immediately regretted it when the hole in his cheek complained.

“Of course, we don’t. We’re in the middle of nowhere, Hannibal,” he sighed. “We have pepper. From a paper packet.”

Hannibal made a small, but clearly disapproving noise behind him. Then there was a shuffle and an unmistakable groan. Will’s gut clenched but he refused to look back, to let any concern leak from his numb, cultivated flatness. *What the fuck am I gonna do with him?*

“Where are we?”

“A disused lifeguard station on the coast, but I can’t be more specific than that. We’re probably a hundred miles from anywhere that matters, which is exactly the point. And why we don’t have chives.”

Will flipped the bacon and then cracked some eggs into the skillet. The whites bubbled and spat in the hot fat and seemed content to chatter into the hut’s silence. Outside, the Atlantic pounded the shore and the wind wrapped around the bleached board walls making them squeal as it slid between the gaps in the roof.

“Will,” Hannibal rasped into that chaos. “I can hear you thinking.”

“Yes, I know you can,” he smirked, and then pushed the food around the skillet petulantly. “It’s one of your great skills. And perhaps it’s one of my great missteps that I can’t stop you.”

There was more silence between them. And then, “Is that what you wanted all along – to stop me?”

Will’s back slouched without his permission, and then his bruises came alive with anger making him hiss his way past the shock of it until he could adjust to the pain. “I… I’m not certain anymore.”

More sullen food-pushing. “In the beginning, I’m sure it was that, yes.”

Hannibal paused again. “When we killed Dolarhyde, it was the most exquisite moment I’ve ever experienced. My life has been full of unique experiences, so I invite you to consider the profundity of that statement, Will.”

Will closed his eyes and tried to avoid seeing the killing across the screen of his eyelids. He bit his tongue and shut down a shiver of anticipation as his damage sang to him, as he and Hannibal danced around the Dragon in synchronicity, blood and screams arcing through the cool moonlight like delicate, blooming ink. He felt the strain and exhilaration and desperate horror slide down his spine to pool and swirl angrily at its base. He felt himself swell at the blood in his mouth. He felt the electric arousal at his mindless abdication of self. He felt his broken mouth split into a smile as he looked on Hannibal’s gore-soaked face, and watched as his gaze both softened and darkened.

Thank you. I <u>see</u> you, and I see the beauty in this, I do. Finally, I see all of it – the whole of the design…

Will opened his eyes and caught himself hyperventilating and clutching the fork for the bacon too hard.

“Stop it,” he gasped.

“Will…” Hannibal’s voice was almost lost to the noise of the sea.

“I said stop it.” Will stirred breakfast around the hot plate too violently, but his voice was quiet and even. The skin across his knuckles was still pale where he gripped the fork.

“The dilemma you’re struggling with right now is entirely of your making, Will. Whatever you decide, *you* are in control. There is no reason to be anxious when you control every outcome.”

Will huffed and wondered if that’s how Hannibal wandered through life: never anxious because he was the sole master of every choice he made. A sliver of envy made him shiver before he could stop it. He shouldn’t envy a disconnected, amoral existence.

But wait… weren’t you halfway there already, Graham?

“Right now, you are like God, Will,” Hannibal continued. “And that power is beautiful.”

Will barked out a laugh and turned to stare back at him. “Maybe I should drop a church roof on you then. Just to see what it feels like.”

Hannibal didn’t move a muscle, his weary, bruised expression wholly focused on Will, as if they were having a session in his office.

“You could. Or you could just walk away and leave me behind. Now. That would have the same effect.”

Will’s gut twisted sharply, but his mind told him it would be easy. *Walk back to that gas station and call Jack. Frame it all as another Hannibal manipulation. Jack owes you one;*

he'll look the other way if it finally frees you from this. Or kill Hannibal first, and then walk to the gas station and call Jack…

He shook his head until it throbbed in protest. *Stop thinking about how great it would feel to kill him… how he'd let you do it and probably look at you in awe the whole time… the dirty pull of using what he's taught you to do something justified, something right…*

Stop thinking about how crushing it would be to go on afterward… without him…

"So, I just leave you in a shack by the sea with your gut torn open, your half-resolved sepsis, and your utter lack of chives and, what? Go back to my life? Go back to Molly and Walter?"

"If that's what you choose, yes."

Hannibal nodded once. His calmness infuriated Will. Didn't he understand that Will was the only reason he was still alive? He was a doctor – he had to.

"Would you let me go?" Will hissed, glare narrowing. He didn't believe Hannibal would let him be, or he didn't want to believe he could. Even if his chances of recovering without help were slim. Will should have been asking for Molly and Walter's sake, because they didn't deserve the danger they'd fallen into by association. But in that moment, Will wasn't thinking about them at all.

"I'm in no position to force you to stay."

"That's not an answer to my question, Hannibal. You sent Francis Dolarhyde after my family. If I leave now, what's stopping you from trying that again?"

Hannibal stared for a moment and then sighed, fluttering the flop of seawater-crusted hair in his face. He looked down over the red-brown petals of dried blood on the bandage at his abdomen. In that moment, Will knew Hannibal understood he might die alone in that shack.

"I won't come after them or you," Hannibal murmured to his stomach, hair hiding his eyes. "The world's far more interesting with you in it, Will. I'm done trying to control your outcome. It's taken me too long to discover that I crave your excoriation more than your compliance. That's… dangerously compelling to me."

Hannibal's eyes flicked back up to meet Will's, strangely haunted and genuine. "I don't want you to *be* me anymore. I just want you to *see* me. And you have. Finally."

Will felt a wave of something rattle through him, and he leaned back against the counter before the heat of the hot plate warned he was too close. He just stood there, hand gripping the plywood countertop, and the smell of bacon burning in the pan. Hannibal stared back from his musty pallet, blanket tangled around his legs, exposing his fever-ravaged torso to the surrounding chill. He didn't add anything to their silence. Perhaps he'd decided that was the best he could do after years of elaborate, destructive coercion.

"I see you…" Will whispered, with the hiss of Garrett Jacob Hobbes in his head. Hannibal nodded.

“You do. Thank you for that, Will. For not just seeing but understanding.”

At least he hadn’t said “empathizing”.

“Do you… see me too?” Will breathed.

Hannibal’s expression collapsed in a way Will hadn’t witnessed since the night Abigail died. He tried to shake the hair out of his eyes and clasped at the wound along his abdomen like he was going to root around inside himself and pull out some vital, bloody offering.

“You’re all I see, Will,” his voice cracked ever so slightly. “The world is monochrome now, and you are the only slash of color in it.”

Will was pounding all over, every inch of him singing in a pure note of combined pain that was beautiful and simple and left a sweet ache in its trail. When had be begun to confuse pain with joy? Did Hannibal teach him that, or had it always been that way in him?

“I… can’t leave you,” Will stuttered and found his body was stuttering too. Glitchy and surreal like he had encephalitis again.

“You can, and you probably should,” Hannibal countered, groaning as he shifted like he wanted to rise and go to Will. But then he gave up. “I can’t say I’m sorry for the things I’ve done, but I’m willing to concede that I’m no longer comfortable with my ability to do you harm.”

“Jesus…” Will gusted, his other hand gripping the countertop to stop him from sliding down to the bare wood floor.

“Yes,” Hannibal nodded solemnly. “It’s a shocking revelation to me as well.”

“No, Hannibal, you don’t understand… I can’t leave you now. I already made that choice when I pulled you from the ocean. The time to leave would’ve been then, with your chest full of freezing seawater. I might’ve even found a way to go back to Molly and the dogs and fishing…”

Hannibal sat completely still, like he’d turned into some terrible High Renaissance sculpture that he would’ve enjoyed sketching. The only way Will could disassociate from that image was to focus on how the skin along Hannibal’s arms was goosepimpling.

“But I can’t do it after four days on the run and trying to keep you from dying or getting caught without questioning why I was doing that in the first place. I can’t leave you to die in this shitty shack to be found by teenaged lifeguards next spring and unceremoniously put in a local pauper’s grave. It would scrape off another layer of me and make me even less hospitable – and I’ve been shaved paper-thin already.”

Will glared at him, Hannibal’s face getting fuzzy and indistinct, then coming back into sharp focus as if Will were trapped between two different snapshots of this reality.

“You see me too,” Will gulped awkwardly. “No one’s given enough of a damn to try that before. Do you know how detached life becomes when no one bothers to see you?”

Hannibal sat up suddenly and bit back something that could only be categorized as a whine, implausible as it seemed. Then he placed both hands flat on the pallet and tried to sit straight, like he was in his office again, relaxing in his leather chair and smoothing the lines of his suit.

“I can’t be other than who I am, Will,” he murmured.

“Neither can I,” Will mumbled back, feeling sick and shaky and liberated simultaneously. “So, where does that leave us?”

“Warily enthralled, perhaps.” Hannibal’s stare took on a new clarity, like his pain had diminished in an instant, and Will was its cure. “I have assets, property, aliases overseas… we could start again…”

Will blinked. *Shit. Is this… is he… shit, what are we agreeing to?*

“You want me to run with you.”

“Fiercely,” Hannibal said with an odd hitch.

“And how do you think that’ll work out in the end?”

Hannibal took a moment to contemplate. “Either in our mutual deaths, or inescapably bewitched by each other’s soul, I suppose. I’m fine with either outcome.”

Will stared blankly and stopped breathing. It was like sinking into the ocean, beyond the shock of hitting the surface and before the chill jack-knifed your central nervous system into gasping and flailing for air again. It was like the darkness and blood swirling around him, curling him up like the hand of a sea god bent on keeping him. It was the disorientation of not knowing up from down, sky from earth, and falling into the numbness of not caring anymore. Then there were hands and legs twined around him, and a body against his, its diminishing warmth pounded into him by the surf. Then he breathed again, tasting saltwater and blood, looking at the damaged face of someone who held him close even as he was slowly dying.

Will broke the surface in his memory, and clutched Hannibal’s unconscious body close as they bobbed on the crests together. He twirled in the surf, searching for the shore. It would’ve been much easier to swim on alone, but their hands were clutched in each other’s shirts, *both* of their hands…

Will turned back to the skillet.

“I burned the bacon,” he said unsteadily.

“It’s okay, Will.” Hannibal’s voice was suddenly warm. Will had thought he’d never feel warm again. But… “Start fresh. Even without chives, I’m sure I’ll enjoy it.”

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